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ABSTRACT

The Canadian government must move beyond its colonial mentality and provide First Nations with the tools to establish self-government as provided for under the authority of the Canadian constitution. Only then can First Nations governments properly provide for their citizens, both on and off reserve. More than half of the First Nations population is under the age of 25. Many of these live off reserve, in urban areas. A study by the Assembly of First Nations' Youth Council has determined that there is very little specific research on First Nation youth/adolescents. The Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples is looking for an action plan for change. A good starting point would be to establish a national database of all Aboriginal youth programs. Then it could be determined what works and what doesn't, so that time would not be wasted reinventing a broken wheel. The database should contain enough information about programs so that successful programs could be replicated. The Youth Council also recommends that First Nations youth be involved in the design and delivery of youth programs, and that youth programs have long-term sustainable funding. It further recommends that the Senate Standing Committee travel across Canada and hear directly from First Nations youth about what works and what doesn't. (TD)

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PRESENTATION TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

By National Chief Matthew Coon Come
of the Assembly of First Nations

and

Ginger Gosnell, Nisga'a Nation
and
Terry Young, Maliseet Nation
of the AFN Youth Council

Tuesday, June 11, 2002

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RC 023954

Introduction by National Chief, Matthew Coon-Come

- *(Traditional Greeting)*
- *(Introduction of AFN delegation)*
- The Assembly of First Nations is the national organization representing all First Nations peoples in this country.
- First Nations - or "Indians" - are one of the three Aboriginal peoples recognized in section 35 of Canada's Constitution Act, 1982.
- Section 35 also recognizes existing and inherent Aboriginal and Treaty rights of our peoples.
- Many of our First Nations signed Treaties with the crown. The fact we signed those treaties demonstrates that we were and are nations, with a government-to-government relationship to the Crown.
- I make this point because the AFN has always maintained that citizens of our First Nations are just that: citizens of nations.
- They are citizens of their nations regardless of where they choose to live – whether it's the far north, towns, or cities.
- When I leave my reserve, I do not take off my "Indian-ness" like a jacket and leave it at the reserve boundary. My citizenship and my rights stay with me wherever I travel.
- As a political representative, I can say that our leaders want to be responsible to their citizenship regardless of where they live. And, in turn, our citizens living off the reserve want to maintain a connection to their community, their culture and their nation.
- My point is that the AFN is working to ensure First Nations governments can represent the interests of all their citizens.
- This government must work with us to move beyond the Indian Act and its colonial mentality and provide us with the tools to establish self-government powers for our governments under the authority of Section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982.
- Only then will we be able to start establishing the institutions and programs to ensure that all of our citizens are provided with programs and services that are necessary for

their well-being. Only then will we be in a position to provide our youth with the tools to start preparing their future and taking control over their lives.

- The Supreme Court's Corbiere decision in 1999 made this same point. It focused on voting rights for people living off-reserve. But it made some bigger points. First, it agreed that citizens living outside of the reserve boundaries are still citizens of their First Nations community.

- And let's be clear about one point right now. When we speak of urban centres, we do not only speak of the major centres like Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa. Many of our youth and our citizens also move to smaller urban centres or even rural towns. Our efforts here today are also directed at them.

- It also noted that people leave First Nations communities for good reasons – not simply because they want nothing to do with their home. They often have to leave if they want to go to University, if there's no employment on the reserve, if they have to wait for housing. Others choose to leave because of the social and health conditions they face in their communities. In either case, this is again the effect that the destructive policies of the past have brought upon our citizens. Government must work with us to improve the social and health conditions in our communities. Our citizens can only be as healthy as our communities are.

- At the AFN, we believe on the one-hand we need to strengthen our communities so that people who want to stay can do so and enjoy a healthy quality of life.

- But we also want to ensure that our people who do leave can maintain a connection to their community, and be entitled to the same programs and services available to our citizens on the reserve.

- While I refer to all these issues as major concerns facing all First Nations citizens, our youth may not all agree. Youth have specific concerns such as access to education, to proper health and housing. These "bread and butter" issues are their major concerns and they will address them later. These are concerns that face them whether they live "on reserve or off reserve".

- I want you, the members of this Committee, to understand that the daily reality of their lives is their priority today. First Nations leaders, the Canadian Government and all Canadians have to recognize their needs and address them so that they may move beyond daily survival. We must work with them to correct this situation and give them hope for the future.

- Over the years, though, the government has legislated division amongst our peoples. Not only will they will not take responsibility for our people who have to leave the community, as their fiduciary obligations demand, they will also not provide our governments with the necessary resources and programs so we can deliver programs and services to our off-reserve citizens.

- We are working to remedy this situation, which we see as an injustice. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if we see some of our citizens initiating legal action based on Corbiere to get rid of this "on-reserve/off-reserve" split.

- But we are also being practical. We are looking for ways to move forward on this issue right now.

- In spring 1999, the AFN set up a Task Force that met with our citizens in all the major urban centres of Canada to determine what our citizens expected from us and their leaders. Overwhelmingly, they stated that they expected us to ensure that programs and services offered to our citizens on reserve also be offered to those living off-reserve.

- The Task Force met with First Nations youth, elders, women and men. Their comments and expectations are vividly expressed in the report, a copy of which we are tabling with this committee today. We urge you to read it and then continue your valuable work by speaking with our citizens across this land to determine how you are best suited to provide First Nations youth, with the assistance they so urgently require.

- The AFN has also been working with the National Association of Friendship Centres to see how we may be able to cooperate on issues related to our citizens living away from their communities. This is especially important since the needs of these individuals, and the youth comprise a large percentage of this group, are not being fully met by the current structures. We hope to be able to work together to convince governments that there are great needs that are not being met at the expense of the lives and well-being of our citizens.

- Allow me here to provide you with a brief overview of how the National Youth Council was established.

- It was established after the second national Youth Conference, which was held in March, 1999 in Ottawa. At this meeting the youth passed two resolutions. One called for Chiefs and Leaders to bring youth to national meetings such as Confederacies and Assemblies. The second one established a youth steering committee to find out how youth wanted to be involved with the AFN. The Youth Steering Committee met during the July 1999 AFN AGA and presented a resolution recognizing the Youth Steering Committee and endorsing their involvement within the AFN. The Youth met again in December 1999 and a decision was made to change the Youth Steering Committee into the National Youth Council.

- One of the goals of the AFN Youth Council was to be recognized and included in the AFN Charter. At the July 2001 Annual General Assembly this was done through resolution 25/2001. The National Youth Council is now a principal component of the AFN and its composition and role and function are described in the Charter .

- The Youth Council is made up of two representatives (1 male/1 female) from each of the 10 AFN regions and are appointed by the Vice Chief of that region. Members of the council are between the ages of 16 to 29 years. At the December 2001 meeting of the Youth Council it was decided that each representative would take on the portfolios of their respective vice chiefs. This would allow each youth Council member to work directly with their vice chiefs and would also assist them in staying informed of the issues.

- The AFN worked with our young leaders to create the Youth Council because everyone agreed that they must have a voice in our work. Re-building our nations is an exciting task and it requires the best effort and dedication of all our peoples. And we know we need people who will carry this work forward into the future.

- For First Nations, it is especially important we draw on the expertise and skills of our young people. In fact, it is important for the country as a whole.

- More than half the First Nations' population is under the age of 25. The rest of Canada is aging and retiring, but the babies from our baby boom are now coming of age.

- This is a dynamic resource. It is in some ways an untapped resource, but business and industry are realizing that these are the leaders of the future. Government needs to follow the lead of industry and reach out to these young people.

- They want education, skills, they want to reach out to their Elders and learn the teachings of their traditions so they can chart their path to the future.

- With that, I will turn the presentation over to the representatives from our Council. The first to speak will be Ginger Gosnell from the Nisga'a Nation. She will be followed by Terry Young of the Maliseet Nation.

Ginger Gosnell:

"To take indigenous traditions seriously means to have a vision for the future; and the current situation of indigenous youth provides a crystal clear picture of the general state of our communities. Native ...youth are real human beings, and that as a group they represent needs and wants, good and bad characteristics, and a collective way of thinking that will soon come to define the social and political landscape in Native communities"

Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto – Taiaiake Alfred, Oxford University Press, 1999, page 129

In many of the presentations made before this committee you have heard statistics quoted that outline the dire situation being faced by Aboriginal and First Nations youth across this country. I am curious to the source of this data. I say this because recently myself and another youth colleague completed research on all literature published since 1990 on high risk behaviors of Aboriginal youth in Canada. In the literature we also took inventory of successful interventions and deterrents as reflected in these publications. What was discovered is that there is very little relevant information on high risk topics that are Canadian based. In fact, most of the Canadian data on high risk Aboriginal activities spoke only of adults or children, not youth or adolescents. A lot of what is out there has much American data as well. Data from decades ago which is obviously too outdated is still cited today, and there is lots of biased and slanted information given.

I think this clearly reflects one of the problems that you face as a committee – and what we face as First Nations youth. Very little relevant work has been done on youth/adolescent specific research. But what concerns me even more is the limited amount of youth specific programs that are designed and delivered by First Nations youth. It is my personal belief that this is the biggest failing of many youth specific programs that currently exist. Many programs in existence are designed using adult based models – taking a program that was designed for adults and expecting it to work the same way for youth only adds to its failure.

I understand that this committee is looking for an 'action plan for change' for Aboriginal youth in Canada. I will relay to you a solution that not only myself firmly believes in, but also many other Aboriginal youth issue 'experts'. There are many issues to address and many barriers to overcome. And one must look to a root solution – a starting point that everyone can benefit from. Our recommendation is a national collection of all Aboriginal youth projects and programs currently out there. This is because there is no knowledge of what is out there. We don't know if we are re-inventing the wheel when it comes to projects and programs needed for Aboriginal youth. The majority of these programs end up crashing and burning – but who learns from that? There is no national Aboriginal youth organization out there that exists for others to draw experience and information from. But if we learn what is out there – if programs are working or failing, if they were designed by youth or adults, who it means to serve (on-reserve, urban, in school or out), and how long it has been in existence. There is so much else that we can learn from one another if we exposed and shared this type of information. By exposing what is lacking, we would be in a better position to identify what is needed. Or what can make a program successful or fail. This information is a starting point. It has not been done to this point. No one out there can tell you what is truly needed because there is no gauge yet for that. Some may say that increased funding for programs may help, and I agree completely, but something else must take first for that to succeed. A program database would ensure that one does not waste any more valuable time re-inventing a broken wheel. With that information, programs for Aboriginal youth can only get better and grow. That is why I insisted on talking to you about this. We all see a need for programs that work. Each youth is a resource waiting to explode into purpose. So we should try hard to access that resource without negativity. If we don't we may have failed our history and our purpose.

Terry Young, Maliseet First Nation

- I would now like to comment on the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy. The National Aboriginal Youth Strategy (NAYS) provides a framework for addressing the health, employment, training, education and social development needs of aboriginal youth by identifying a series of goals and suggested approaches. Although the strategy is fairly comprehensive in its identification of goals and suggested approaches, the probability of it being universally implemented across all jurisdictions seems unlikely. One concern is that without comprehensive agreement to change how youth programming is designed or delivered or how youth policy is developed, federally and provincially/territorially, once again we will be getting youth programs that meet the needs of government but not the needs of Aboriginal and First Nations youth.

- As you are aware, the AFN is not a program delivery organization. It is a political lobby group seeking to ensure that our Treaty and Aboriginal Rights are respected and protected across this land. As such we do not have the capacity to identify success stories or best practices as has been requested by the committee.

- I suggest to you that, as members of this committee, you are in the best position to travel across this land, visit our communities and meet our youth living in urban areas, and hear them out. Work in collaboration with youth and you will find out first-hand what their needs are. You will therefore be in a position to take their recommendations and bring them forward to the government. You have an important role to play in this debate. We urge you to fulfill it to your best abilities.

- As you develop your action plan for change, we believe that the most important change you could and should recommend is that youth need to be involved in all aspects of program development and delivery. We believe that projects that currently exist and are successful are that way because youth involvement has been maintained from start to finish.

- To also ensure success, youth need access to resources such as increased longer term funding, consistent adult support, capacity building, and access to traditional knowledge. For the most part, current youth programming receives only minimal and short term funding or does not allow for youth to focus on high risk areas such as hiv-aids; substance abuse; violence; homelessness and sexual exploitation. Funding needs to be made available for awareness and prevention programs around these issues.

- Finally, education reform is crucial to urban Aboriginal / First Nations youth so that they are able to achieve the highest standard of living possible.

In closing I would like to provide our recommendations to the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples

1. As the Standing Committee gathers information on best practices/success stories they should compile the information in a data base that can be accessed by anyone who is looking for this information. There is a lack of information on youth programming that is working and it would fulfill a need by helping urban communities to develop programming.
   The data base should not just contain information that is program specific, it should also provide enough details that an interested service provider would know how to develop a similar program.

   Gathering this information will also provide a starting point for the Standing Committee in that it would provide you with information on how you should proceed. It would answer some questions such as: do existing successful programs have access to stable long term funding; what other kinds of programs are needed; how can they further develop what's working. All of this would assist in your work in developing your action plan for change.

2. As recommended in AFN's Urban Issues Task Force Report First Nations people and more specifically, First Nations youth should design and deliver their own youth programs. They are best suited to make them relevant, sustainable and culturally specific to our youth. Youth Programs need to have long term sustainable funding attached to them.

3. The Senate Standing Committee must travel across the country to both small towns and large cites and speak directly to First Nations and Aboriginal youth so the youth can directly inform and educate the Committee on what's working and what isn't.

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